

*SBT-AE-009. Two Famous Death Poems By Shirley And Shakespeare.
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Two Famous Death Poems By Shirley And Shakespeare. Appreciation By P S Remesh Chandran

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Death is the end of all earthly cares and the beginning of eternal things. It is believed that the moment we die, we are born in another universe. With it begins a new way of being. More number of songs and poems has been written on death than on birth. It is considered an important event in man's life. In many communities throughout the world, death is an occasion for rejoicing and celebration. Shakespeare's Fear No More and James Shirley's Death The Leveller are appreciated here.

Shakespeare at last has begun to be read and appreciated, than being acted on stage.

I. FEAR NO MORE. A Song By William Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare was one of the world's greatest poets and dramatists. He considered himself a poet, but to make a living, could not exclude himself from the tedious work of being on stage. He very much wished his plays to be read and appreciated more as literary creations, than to be acted on stage as plays. His wishes have been granted by Time. Now his plays are rarely acted, but being read and appreciated as literary masterpieces as he wished. He is being taught and learned in universities, and less in theatres.

Fear No More is a song from his play Cymbeline. Two brothers weep over the supposed death of their sister who is only unconscious. The song is actually an Ode To Death. Death comes as a release from the evils of the world and is inevitable to all. This song is the poet's prayer for the peace of the departed soul.

Work in this World, for which wages will be paid in Heaven.



01. A Burial Painting By Enrico Pollastrini 1851.

When we have done our works in this world, we return to our home which is in heaven where we will be paid our wages for the work done in the world. We will be blessed or punished according to the measure of the virtue or vice resulted from our work. It is a consolation to think that there is an after world there where our actions are weighed and judged by sympathetic and kindly beings, after having gone through a life time of injustices and ingratitude in this world. Death is a release which is universal and man cannot escape from it.

Even the young brimming with vibrancy and loveliness of life has to die.



02. *Children Accompanying The Dead To Burial* By Vasily Perov 1865.

There is no armour to hold against death and man has to succumb to the inevitability of the final passing away. Or is it the passing away final? He has no protection from death and cannot refuse to pass through this gateway of death to the next world and the next form of being. 'The rich and leisurely golden lads and girls and the poor and lowly chimney-sweepers who do the dirtiest of works- all have to die. Physical strength, scholarship and authority follow man to the grave and finally turn to dust and oblivion. Even young lovers who seem to be brimming with the vibrancy and loveliness of life have to die some day.

Is it to bliss that we go after death?



03. The Poor Man's Way To Grave By Jakub Schikaneder 1886.

The parting soul finally gets some peace, since it has now been released from the clutches of the world, the evils of the world. It needn't anymore fear the heat of the Sun or the angry outbreak of winter. The frown and anger and displeasure of well-placed persons and people in power and the mortal strikes from authorities and tyrants- the very things that make hell in human lives and man fears most - needn't anymore be feared.

With death, our burdens of life are lightened, for we do not need clothing and eating anymore.



04. *Wounded Worker's Farewell* By Erik Henningsen 1895.

With death, our burdens of life are lightened, for we do not need clothing and eating anymore. The deadly lightning and thunder-bolts- the dread of all out-in-the-field workers- will not touch/affect us anymore. Abusing words and unkind criticism, which we encountered everywhere in life and which constantly humiliated us, lowered our status and self-respect and tormented our souls, will no more reach our ears, for we will have no more ears. Weeping and happiness are past. We reach bliss, the state of supreme happiness. And distinctions also are things of the past; the fragile reed and the hardened oak are the same to the dead man.

A land where sceptre and crown and scythe and spade are made equal.



05. Grave Diggers And Grieving Family By Erik Henningsen 1886.

II. DEATH THE LEVELLER. A Poem By James Shirley.

James Shirley was an English teacher and poet who became famous later for his plays. He died during the great London Fire. Like Shakespeare's *Fear No More*, *Death The Leveller* also is part of one of his plays. He conceives death as a great leveller, an equalizer, who levells the distinctions between the rich and the poor, the high and the low and the hard and the soft. The glories of our blood and state are nothing but shadows. Family traditions and social status do not come to our aid when we are dying. Man has no immunity against fate. Death lays his icy hands on kings and his subjects alike. Kings wearing the sceptre and crown, the symbols of their sovereignty and peasants wearing the scythe and spade, the tools of their trade, are all brought to dust and made equal by death without any distinctions.

Eloquence of a poet in defense of death.



06. *A Poor Man's Funeral* By Oscar Graf 1900.

Glory is but a momentary glimpse of eternity. It just shows us the magnificence waiting for us in our after life to live in permanently. Great emperors like Alexander and Ashoka have conquered vast plains of land and hordes of armies, won battlefields and raised victory memorials, but they too have had to go to the other world. Great swordsmen reaped heads of opponents in the battlefield, but even their strong nerves have had to yield at last and they too have had to stoop to fate, early or late. Actually they were not winning over the other, but taming each other. Great War heroes all will become wounded captives one day, creeping to their deaths. In the hands of death they are now pale with shame because, unlike in the battlefield, they cannot fight their captor now.

Only our just and right actions will blossom and emit sweet smell, after we have gone.



07. *Laid At Rest In Elegance* By Luis Montero 1867.

Victory memorials may wither away and great battles in history forgotten. The once-victor will one day become a bleeding victim on the purple altar of death, purple because of blood and gore. However high our heads are held, they will one day have to come down to the cold tomb. Great heroic acts do not survive us. Only the just and right actions of a man will blossom and emit sweet smell, after he has long withered away in dust.

Are we really living here, or lying somewhere else and dreaming about living here?

III. WHY THIS SIMILARITY BETWEEN THE TWO SONGS?

Death is a universal closing of a way of life in one universe and the beginning of another in another universe. It is believed that, and also it is a thrill to think that, once that gravitational constriction of a black hole that is the life-proofed passage between two universes is passed, the dead and the now reborn organism would feel nothing about anything that might or might not have happened. It would be a feeling like everything reversed mathematically. Some seers have even doubted as to whether we are really living in this world, or lying relaxed in some other planet or universe and dreaming about living in this World. Where seers and poets are concerned,

and involved, anything strange can be conceived and formulated. Bizarre notions are not un-travelled lands for poets. We would expect these two poets to elaborate on life after the feeling of death. It was but their modesty and reserve that prevented William Shakespeare and James Shirley from elaborating on after-death experiences, and not their unfamiliarity with any such notions, especially Shakespeare having created a long line of uncanny characters.

Death is universal, so rouses similar feelings in man everywhere.



08. *The Final Resting Place* By Albert Anker 1863.

Since death is universal, it rouses similar feelings in man everywhere, though intensity and direction of emotions may vary from person to person, country to country and continent to continent. Some spend the time of bereavement in absolute silence and grief and some spend it in dancing and singing and revelry. The universality of death is a foundation for the similarity between the two poems, *Fear No More* and *Death The Leveller*. They both share the universal feeling about death. They are similar in many other aspects also. They hold the same views and project the same ideas. Both poems celebrate the glory of death. Both poems are part of plays by the authors. Both poets used the same word *Sceptre* to denote Kingly Authority. Shakespeare hints that we will be paid our wages in heaven for our deeds done in this world. Shirley warns us that only our just and rightful actions would survive us. Both poets project the inevitability and inescapability of

death. Shakespeare's life period in England was 1564-1616 and Shirley's was 1596-1666. Shirley was 14 years old when Shakespeare was 44. Therefore Shirley certainly might have been inspired by Shakespeare. Or it can also be that he was absolutely independent of Shakespeare's influence in his thoughts. And both poets were Londoners too.

Has mankind lost the formula for the longevity of life?

What is the highest possible lifespan of human beings and how can it be raised are questions scientists have been trying to answer for a long time. How death occurs and why it occurs also have been subjects for research, and speculation, through many centuries. Some of the Biblical characters seem to have lived through 800 and 900 years. The ancient Indian classics Mahabharata and Ramayana also have plenty of characters who lived beyond a thousand years. They must have known the formula for the prolongation of life. Even though it is believed that the Bible is a coded manifesto recording everything that concerns man, even the events that may happen in his future, mankind seems to have lost this formula for suspending death and prolonging life. He could have lived at least 150 years and succumbed to death only after fulfilling his mission somewhat to his satisfaction, had he not lost this formula for longevity of life. Lifespan of human beings is not a fixed one, not seventy or eighty years anyway, for it has risen and fallen everywhere in accordance with the availability or unavailability of food and other resources.

What is the greatest wonder in this world?



09. *Here Lies Your Ancestors* By Rudolf Wiegmann 1835.

In Mahabharata, there is this story of Prince Yudhishtira and his four younger brothers travelling through jungle in search of water when they were ousted from their kingdom after having lost a game of gambling to their co-brother. The youngest brother was the first to find water in a pond beneath a tree. But before he could drink, an incorporeal voice from heaven warned him not to drink that water lest he would die, unless he correctly answered a question before drinking. The question was ‘What is the greatest wonder in this world’? He heeded not the warning, drank the water, and fell dead then and there. His three elders who went in search of the youngest brother one after the other also had the same experience and fell dead beside that pond. Finally Yudhishtira went in search of the four and was asked the same question by the incorporeal voice. ‘Even while death occurs everywhere around us and we still thinking we will never die is the greatest wonder in this world’ was Yudhishtira’s answer, which pleased the incorporeal voice. It was the Man of Time in disguise, who resurrected from death the four princes and blessed Yudhishtira for his virtuousness.

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Meet the author: About the author and accessing his other literary works.



Editor of Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum. Author of several books in English and in Malayalam. And also author of 'Swan, The Intelligent Picture Book'. Edits and owns Bloom Books Channel. Born and brought up in Nanniyode, a little village in the Sahya Mountain Valley in Kerala. Father British Council-trained English Teacher and mother university-educated. Matriculation with High First Class, Pre Degree studies in Science with National Merit Scholarship, discontinued Diploma Studies in Electronics and entered politics. Unmarried and single.

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Shirley might have been inspired by Shakespeare.
 But, certainly I'm inspired by your literary work here on Wikinut.
 This article of appreciation by you has brought the great poets together.

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